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ABSTRACT

Electronic media have undergone substantial growth and change in the past two decades, and the structure of the programming industry has also changed, with the competition for programming becoming more intense. At the same time, government has moved toward deregulation in this area, with the result being increasing concentration, commercialization, and vertical integration of the different sectors of the electronic media, i.e., cable, broadcasting, programmers, and networks. The technology of the electronic media long ago outstripped the abilities of current governmental, educational, and social institutions to deal with it. The impact of television ultimately affects an individual watching a program, but the decisions behind those programs and the structure of the decision-making entities bear close scrutiny if we are to have some understanding of and control over the electronic media. With the marriage of marketplace and the broadcasting industry, television has been very effective at creating a "pseudocommunity," or an illusion of community and belonging, immediacy, and sincerity. One of the greatest dangers of the pseudocommunity is that it undermines those activities and values that contribute to real community. Deregulation has also had a substantial impact on the broadcast industry, bringing volatility, concentration, and an explosion of the demand for programming. These changes have had a particularly strong and negative impact on the nature of local programming. A major debate now centers on what exactly the television industry is and what types of regulation, if any, should be undertaken. However, the need is to come up with policies based on principles that grow out of the role we want the media to play in our society. (24 references) (EW)

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Television in the '80's: New Technologies, New Challenges

by

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"Technology opens doors, and oligopoly marches just behind, closing them."

Todd Gitlin
(quoted in Corson 385)

The 1970's and 1980's have been decades of unprecedented change in the electronic media. We have seen an absolute explosion of new technologies, as well as new developments in old technologies: 400-megahertz cable, VCR's, satellite transmission, HDTV, interactive video, portable production equipment, etc. In part because of this, the structure of the programming industry is changing rapidly. The competition for programming is intense. The industry has been thrown into chaos trying to meet the need. At the same time, the response of governmental regulators has been toward deregulation of the media based on a "free marketplace" philosophy. The result has been the increasing concentration, commercialization, and vertical integration of the different sectors of the electronic media: cable, broadcasters, programmers, networks. This concentration has begun to extend to other media as well, as in the case of newspaper mogul Rupert Murdoch and the fledgling Fox network.

What has been the impact of these changes on the television programming seen in the average American home? Beginning in the 1970's, we heard many promises from the television industry of increased quality, diversity, accessibility, etc. in programming. We heard about exciting experiments with interactive video and

video publishing. We could look forward to greater input into local decision-making once all homes were wired for "electronic participation" in town meetings.

Former FCC member Nicolas Johnson was hopeful when he said, "Perhaps as never before technology given us the opportunity for a new 'meeting of men, meeting of minds,' in our unworkable inner cities." (quoted in Gillespie 8.)

But what have been the actual effects on programming of the new technologies, deregulation, and the growth of the cable industry? Have the promises of greater quality, diversity, more local programming become realities?

Commenting on the particular promise of the cable industry, media critic Les Brown wrote in Channels,

> "Cable is uniquely equipped, among all media, to advance the ideal of free speech and create an open marketplace of ideas. And yet it is doing its utmost to be spared having to provide outlets for free speech--and doing so shamelessly in the name of the First Amendment." (quoted in Corson 385).

Though Brown's comment pertained specifically to the cable industry, the same influences that have determined the shape of cable have thrown the entire industry into flux. In 1983, Robert Corson raised a warning about cable that could be taken to include the entire television industry:

> "Now, while only providing entertainment, the question of status (common carrier, etc.) seems academic. When cable

turns into a necessity in some future information age, monopolistic control of the medium will be a critical issue. Federal and state regulators may be playing catch-up ball in the coming years, fighting a well-entrenched industry" (Corson 380).

The Future Is On Us

My premise is that the future is already on us. The technology of the electronic media long ago outstripped the abilities of our current institutions (governmental, educational, social) to deal with it. We are already playing catch up. We are trying to make rational decisions about a phenomenon that has changed the way we make decisions. We are using old structures to deal with something that has no precedent in our history or experience.

Support for this premise lies in an examination of the state of our programming; in a comparison of the potential, the promises, the actual delivery on those promises; and in a discussion of future trends in the programming field. The impact of television ultimately comes down to an individual's watching a program (or now, in the days of remote control, many programs simultaneously). The decisions behind those programs, and the structure of those decision-making entities, bear close scrutiny if we are to have some understanding of and control over our electronic media.

Technology itself has no ideology. Technological change is inevitable. It holds great promise for solving problems, enhancing the quality of life in our communities, etc. But technology takes on the values of those who control it, and it has irresistible momentum. In this society, at this time, commercial forces control television. Many other nations have chosen to develop their broadcasting industries along a mixed model, with both strong public sectors, and private commercial sectors. Our own highly commercialized system is a logical result of the U.S. emphasis on "market forces" to insure the public good.

American television, developed as a commercial entity, has produced the most widely emulated, and widely exported cultural industry in the world. At the same time, it has developed its own unique forms, for better or worse, such as the situation comedy, photojournalism, Sesame Street, and the styles and formats of TV news (Gotlieb 1).

The history of federal control of the electronic media has been inconsistent, with the federal government always a little nervous about why and what exactly needed to be regulated. In the early days of broadcast regulation, the Federal Radio Commission made clear that broadcasters were not due protection under the First Amendment. In 1932, in Trinity Methodist V. FRC, broadcasters were likened to peepshow and carnival operators, rather than newspapers. In drafting the 1927 Federal Radio Commission legislation, Senator Dill lifted the phrase "public

interest, convenience, and necessity" out of the Transportation Act of 1910. This vague phrase, and the concept of a limited resource (broadcast spectrum) were the only rationales the FRC and FCC could muster to justify regulation.

However, it is obvious that television is not just another source of entertainment. Our society should make conscious, informed decisions about the influence we want television to have in our lives. These decisions need to be based on a clear understanding of the structure and influence of television. We must be willing to look beyond those political and social formulations that have served us in the past

What You See is Less than What You Get

Whenever I read commentary decrying the poor quality of television programming, I am reminded of the story of the elderly lady who complained that the film "Bonnie and Clyde" would teach young people bad driving habits (Schillaci 185). On the one hand, we all give lip service to the pervasiveness of television. On the other hand, we still too often focus our criticism on the content. Obviously television is much more than that. Neil Postman, in his very provocative book, Amusing Ourselves To Death: Public Discourse In the Age of Entertainment, introduces the concept of the "information/action ratio." In earlier times, (pre-electronic media), the information an individual possessed was limited, but was much more closely related to

aspects of the world over which he had some control. Now, according to Postman, with the electronic media,

> ...the information/action ratio is so high, it sets us awash in a sea of contextless bits of information....People (are) faced with the problem of information glut, which means that simultaneously they (are) faced with a problem of diminished social and political potency (Postman 68).

Postman warns that the fragmented, superficial nature of the television medium undermines our ability to make rational decisions, to learn, to be active participants in society. The fragmented, entertainment-formatted information we get through television is counterposed to linear, literacy-based information we get from reading, or "typographic culture." Television gives us more information with less understanding. Postman is unconcerned with content, but very disturbed by the technological form of television.

A recent example illustrating Postman's point was the debate on December 1, 1987, on network television with (not between) twelve Presidential candidates. Each candidate was given 2 minutes to make a statement, and 30 seconds to respond to a question. Compare this format with the development of issues in the historic Lincoln-Douglas debates of the 19th century, which often lasted for an entire day. Granted that many problems have been solved by our communications technologies, depth of Presidential debates has raced backwards. Which format represents deeper, more informed examination of the issues?

Which is a ludicrous parody of debate, turning an individually important decision (Who will I vote for for President?) into something that should be held in Atlantic City and hosted by Bert Parks? Election year politics (and further, the institution of the Presidency) have been fundamentally changed by television and our reliance on it.

With the marriage of the marketplace and the broadcasting industry, television has been very effective at creating a phenomenon of "pseudo-community," discussed by James R Beniger in his article, "Personalization of Mass Media, and the Growth of Pseudo-Community." Beniger suggests that this illusion of "belonging" and community is created by technologies that are increasingly successful at conveying sincerity and intimacy, mimicking those qualities we look for in personal relationships. Beniger states that this sense of "pseudo-community" is not just a result of conscious manipulation on the part of broadcasters, but also comes as a result of other technological changes in the service of commercial interests, e.g. computerized direct mail (360). One of the greatest dangers of pseudo-community is that undermines those activities and values that contribute to real "community": it lulls people into passivity. At the same time it is creating an illusion of involvement, immediacy and sincerity, it allows people to substitute passive attention for direct involvement. This undermines the very fundamentals of a democratic society. (Larsen, et. al. 324).

In an article entitled "In Search of "The People": A Rhetorical Alternative, Michael McGee argues

> ...a..."people" (are) defined not by circumstances or behavior, but by their collective faith in a rhetorical vision..."the people" are the social and political myths they accept. But because a new myth competes for public faith both against objective reality and against other myths, it is difficult to get a clear view of a "people" by analyzing a single myth (McGee 247).

McGee states that "a people" can only be understood (are defined by) the rhetorical artifacts they produce. To carry his argument a step further, television programming, as the "rhetorical artifacts" of our shared vision(s), reflects the "national vision" of "the people" of America. Television, (especially for young people who are less and less inclined, and required, to read), much more than our folklore, books, stories, or music is the collection of experiences, myths, dreams and aspirations that we all share as Americans. National experiences are mediated experiences: the Vietnam War, Watergate, Iran/Contra, etc. National anchormen are trusted father-figures, television stars are our cultural heroes and heroines.

I bring Postman, Beniger, and McGee into this because, as we will see later, the recent developments in the media industry have been at least partly based on the philosophy, clearly espoused by Mark Fowler, during his tenure as FCC Chairman, that "the television is just another household appliance, like the

toaster..." (quoted in Black 113). Some toaster.

The State of the Industry

Up until the mid-70's, broadcasting was television. Local licensees were seen very loosely as community servants, operating under the watchful eye of the FCC, in the "public interest." There were 3 networks, plus a stepchild, PBS. There were federal regulations preventing cross-media monopolization, as well as trafficking (buying and selling for quick turn-over profit), and requiring fairness, local programming, etc. This is a romantic characterization, since nationally, the programming industry was concentrated in the hands of a few. Because most stations were owned, or at least managed, by local entities, there was somewhat more community input, or at least identity, in local programming. Federally, minimal safeguards and responsibilities were outlined. The regulatory ethos was one of benevolent tolerance for licensees, as long as they didn't commit heinous crimes.

The past 15 years have seen tremendous upheaval, structural changes, and regulatory battles. The industry is still in flux, and the battles rage on: over cable legislation, between broadcasters and cable, over concentration of media, between independent stations and network affiliates, between Congress and broadcasters on the Fairness Doctrine, over the license renewal process, and the fundamental question of who owns the airwaves. The FCC has historically wavered between the polls of allowing "free market forces" to shape the industry, and governmental

responsibility to see that the broadcasters, if not the cable industry, operate "in the public interest, convenience, and necessity." In this dichotomy, we see the twin evils of rampant commercialism and monopolization of the media, and government domination in the interests of the ever-elusive public interest.

In the past fifteen years of tremendous technological change, we have seen the chaos resulting from the free reign of the industry over its own future. Once cable technology had eliminated the argument of a limited spectrum as a restriction on program choice, regulators seemed loath to arrive at any other reason why television should be subject to government control. Local broadcast stations have become chips in huge speculative poker games. Fortunes have been made and lost, and remade. Most of the nation has been wired for cable, (a $21 billion industry by 1990), and on the most advanced systems, viewers have over 100 choices of what to watch (Corson 381). We're already running out of room on our satellites. Over 30% of American homes have VCRs, and a large number own their own video cameras. All of this change has had insignificant positive change on local availability of high-quality programming, and in the case of local programming, there has been significant negative effects (Nader 37).

Deregulation Fever

The trend toward deregulation started well before the Fowler tenure at the FCC. The two previous chairmen, Richard Wiley

(Republican, appointed by Nixon), and Charles Ferris (Democrat, appointed by Carter), both contributed to the trend to view broadcasting as solely another business (Black 112). Early deregulation efforts attempted to relieve broadcasters of some of the bureaucratic control they had lived with since the early days of licensing.

Explosive growth the the cable industry, along with other new technologies, coincided with a Republican Administration in Washington whose FCC Chairman (Fowler) regarded his own agency as "the last of the New Deal Dinosaurs." Norman Black, in "The Deregulation Revolution," quotes Fowler,

> "I view broadcasting as a very competitive, very vigorous market, with lots of voices...We can see television stations now putting more money into their news budgets, on the theory that in order to survive in this new video world, they've got to be more deeply rooted in the community" (Black 113).

Black draws a distinction between two types of deregulation, "letting in," and "letting go." While he and other Fowler opponents "concede that the public has benefited from some of the FCC's recent moves (more FM stations, LPTV, wireless cable, etc.), overall, the FCC's "letting go" will tends to give "overwhelming power to the voices with the most money" (Black 112).

Black goes on to list the major changes that have occurred in the industry between 1980 and 1984.

1. Broadcasters no longer have an obligation to provide local news or public affairs programming.

2. No requirements for educational programming for children, and broadcasters can produce their own political debates, instead of having to cover those arranged by outside organizations.

3. No requirement that a broadcaster must own a station for three years before selling it. (This has led to tremendous "trafficking"--upheaval and volatility in local markets, where speculators have bought, sold, and traded stations with negative effects on local communities.)

4. Regulation to prevent over-concentration and monopolization has ended, where numbers of stations one company can hold within a market has been increased.

5. Broadcasters are no longer required to keep logs and records, or financial reports for the FCC.

6. Cable systems may import any outside signal they want. Over the air pay-TV has been almost completely deregulated. Applicants for LPTV are chosen in lottery, rather than on merit (Black 111).

Additional changes since 1984 are:

1. No limit on minutes per hour of commercials. This has led to the controversial "30-minute commercial" format that

characterizes children's cartoon shows. Many local UHF stations have been taken over by the Home Shopping Network, which is a 24-hour commercial.

2. The "must carry" rule requiring a cable system to carry all local signals has been changed after fierce debate between broadcaster and cable companies. Stipulations for carriage of public television signals are still in dispute.

3. Repeal of the "Fairness Doctrine" requiring broadcasters to present all sides of an issue if one side is presented.

4. Relaxation of the rules on cross-media ownership, and temporary permission for broadcast/cable cross-ownership, (e g. ABC-Capital Cities) (Channels Field Guide '87 7-8).

In addition, industry analysts report the efforts by broadcasters to revive some of the "public service" requirements of earlier times. On the surface, this seems to be a return to earlier standards, but this is actually part of a larger effort by broadcasters to retire the "comparative renewal process" in licensing. Reassumption of the very modest public service requirements (which most established stations fulfill with their local newscasts) would be a trade-off for making challenges more difficult during license renewal (Frankel 15).

In addition to deregulation efforts by the FCC and the broadcast industry, Congress, the cable industry and local municipalities reached a compromise on many different regulatory issues in The Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984. Worked out over a period of 3 years, the Act is a complex, comprehensive

guideline for the development of the cable industry for the next period. It provides some protection for the access of "third party voices" to the cable. It provides for the local governments to have some measure of control over their cable franchisees (Myerson 543-570). However, the larger picture of deregulation suggests trends in the industry that may cancel out those opportunities.

Effects of Deregulation On the Industry

What has been the overall effect of the deregulatory movement on television? First, let me deal with the structural changes in the industry. In the following section, I will discuss the effect of these changes on television programming.

The major effects have been three: volatility, concentration, and an explosion of the demand for programming.

In 1986, all three networks came under new ownership or leadership as a result of the general economic volatility in the U.S. (Channels '87 Field Guide 8).

Once the FCC rescinded the anti-trafficking regulations, the opportunity for fast profits was irresistible. Because of the requirements for licensing, broadcast stations had changed hands very seldom in the past. They tended to be undervalued because of this. They were seen as ripe fruit ready for picking by any company with enough money or enough pull to pay the price. The same speculative fever that has caused the rise of hostile takeovers (mergers and junk bond economics) in other industries in

the '80's gripped the broadcast industry. Corporations that had no prior interest in broadcasting bought up stations on speculation, while other companies in the industry expanded their holdings.

Joseph Vitale, in Channels (September, 1987), reported that "Since suspension of anti-trafficking rules in 1983, there have been 402 transfers of television stations and 2,519 of radio stations. And when new owners take charge, they usually bring their own news directors" (47).

Vitale surveyed news directors, and found that while the average tenure at a station in 1972 was 40 months, in 1987, that expectancy had shrunk to 18 months (Vitale 46). The example of the news directors underscores the larger effect of this trend: broadcast stations were no longer in the hands of stable local management entities. For the new owners, the bottom line was to cut costs, maximize advertising revenues, and often resell to the highest bidder. Even for those companies who did not intend to resell, the priority was to cut "fat," which in this context, came to mean cut all local programming except news. For news, it meant to put on the cheapest show possible, and still stay within the rather loose definition of local news ("rip and read", etc.).

The CBS affiliate in Columbus, Georgia, WRBL, is a prime example of a victim of this type of management move. WRBL was formerly the leading station in the Columbus market. According to Production Manager Barry Cammon, it changed hands twice in 7

years, and is now owned by a company out of Terre Haute, Ind. All decisions are made on a corporate level out of town. Its news department has been cut to half its original size. The station has been beset with a steady stream of talented staff defections. It has cancelled all but one of its previously popular local programs, and has no separate budget for public affairs.

The volatility in the broadcast industry has virtually changed the face of local programming. The strength of local programming was minimal, at best, especially in some markets, because FCC requirements for local programming were vague and loosely interpreted by budget-conscious local broadcasters. But there was some minimal effort at a "local identity" on the part of network affiliates. In many communities like Columbus and Atlanta, stations competed for the best local programming, and the reputation for being most conscious of community issues.

Because this volatility of station ownership, and loss of local programming has occurred simultaneously with the growth of independent stations (non-network affiliate) and cable, the loss of local identity among the stations has been muted. Now that we are accustomed to seeing the local news from Chicago or New York on one of the "Superstations," the loss of priority of our own community affairs maybe less evident.

Concentration in the television industry has happened across markets among broadcasters, as well as vertically, among networks, programmers, cable, and broadcasters. Corson reports:

"One-third of all cable companies are owned by the broadcast industry... Time, Inc., the second largest owner of cable systems in the U.S., owns HBO and Cinemax... In 1980 the Time Video Group surpassed the entire NBC-TV Network in earnings" (Corson 382).

These statements were made in 1983, and the trend has gained momentum since then. Turner Broadcasting owns cable networks, a superstation, MGM, and now is negotiating with NBC for cross-ownership. Hollywood studios like Universal and Lorimar have bought TV stations. Disney Studios owns a pay-TV network on cable. (Channels '87 Field Guide 9).

All of this cross-ownership and concentration is not by definition bad. The problem does not show itself until we look at the programming. At the risk of sounding like Spiro Agnew, what does it mean when all the television programming we see is decided on by a few major corporations, all of whom have interlocking interests, little accessibility, and no accountability to any public institution with any clout?

Theoretically, this tremendous concentration is part of the explosion of programming choices available to the American public. With so many channels available, the question of diversity and openess should be forever solved. The proliferation of independents, the beginning of Fox, Inc., a new (cable-owned) network, the availability of almost unlimited importation of distant signals, all this should herald the dawn of a Golden Age

of TV. These changes have heralded the dawn of a Golden Age for some TV programmers. There is intense competition for programming. Some networks have begun their own in-house production units. Syndication costs for tried-and-true series are astronomical (Channels '87 Field Guide 14).

Brandon Tartikiff of NBC laments the passing of a time when a formula for a successful program could be shelved and then recycled after a few years, when the time was right, "The whole history of television is on every day!" (Henry, 56). Now that NBC Productions is producing programming for Fox Broadcasting, the NBC affiliates are up in arms (Henry 56). History predicts that they will settle down when they all own each other.

Logic, hope, and the free market philosophy would tell us that increased competition would create the conditions for the entry of new, competitive, independent, imaginative programmers into the market. What has been the actual development?

Unkept Promises: Quality, Diversity, Local Voices

> "The Second Age of Television is a new time in which the networks are joined by cable, syndication, VCR's, a fourth network, pay-by-view operators, and marketers of backyard dishes in pursuit of the same audience, with essentially the same kinds of programs, give or take production values and styles. Old wine is filling many new bottles" (Channels '87 Field Guide 4).

"Quality programming" is an elusive concept. I cannot hope to entertain the debate here over what makes a television program "high quality." Postman would argue that the concept is spurious. I do not mean that the only quality programming is cultural or that it has to be produced by the BBC. (Actually, the reliance of PBS on British programming sources is another paper.) I will loosely define "quality" for purposes here as meaning televison programming that celebrates a diversity of formats, subjects, and sentiments, that stretches our imaginations.

The last few years are littered with the corpses of efforts at higher quality programming: CBS Cable was successful at entering cable systems and winning subscribers with arts programming. But it could not attract advertisers. When it folded in 1982 after 14 months, the network summed it up as "Culture just doesn't sell in this country" (Corson 383). Warner/Amex unplugged its QUBE interactive experiment in 1984 after summing up that the viewers in Columbus, Ohio, just did not have much to say. (Channels '87 Field Guide 10). Kirsten Beck, in her 1983 book, Cultivating the Wasteland, chronicled the demise of the efforts at cultural programming on cable, but still held out hope that eventually the television industry would come through with some innovative programming efforts.

Intense competition and high production costs have seemed to lead to the retreat of the programming industry into tried-and-true formulas, reruns, and lowest-common-denominator television. Waterman concludes in his content analysis of 4 cable networks

and public television that though original programming was relatively high several years ago, it has declined, and that use of British programming sources is high on all these channels. According to Waterman, high production costs are blamed. (Waterman 106).

Competition between cable, satellite, and broadcast does not seem to have had a stimulative effect on the quality of programs, though National Cable Television Association President Jim Mooney predicts, "In upcoming years, the marketplace will force the cable industry to spend more for programming" (Broadcasting 54). Whether this will translate into better, less homogeneous programming we cannot tell. So far, it has meant a retreat in the opposite direction.

According to Corson,

> "Instead of greater cultural diversity, they have staked out their turf, and produce lowest-common-denominator programming to attract bigger, mor sellable audiences. Advertising is becoming more evident. The growing importance of advertising compels program producers to take few risks, to strive for what is likely to be consumed by the most people. Efforts to develop high-quality programming are punished in the marketplace"(Corson 382).

On the other hand, Channels '87 Field Guide sees room for optimism:

"The question today is whether there will be enough attractive programming and advertising dollars to go around. Odds are there won't be enough of either, and to survive, some of the new media may be forced into relatively narrow niches in the marketplace, offering distinct programming and quality services not already found on commercial television" (9).

When the FCC heralded the end of the "limited spectrum" argument for broadcast regulation, the assumption was that free access to the distribution of communication was at hand. The time for "diverse voices" was here. Competition would create multiplicity (Compaine 380). Complaints about the "sameness" of programming under the new technologies are reflected in this comment from P. Espinosa of the Stanford Center For Chicano Research in 1985. "Latinos are as invisible as always because programming sources are the same. Low power TV can't be expected to be different" (Espinosa 47).

The problem is a lack of accessibility to the channels by those diverse voices, a situation that has been made worse, not better, by the new shape of the industry, and particularly by the effect deregulation has had on local television.

In 1984, when the FCC eliminated community ascertainment requirements, percentage requirements for locally originated programming, public service programming, and record-keeping stipulations (Independent Thinking 7-6), many local broadcasters

took this as a green light to drop most community-oriented efforts. This trend, combined with the volatility in television ownership, has led to a loss of identity for many stations, especially in the smaller markets. Joseph Vitale calls this identity "institutional memory": a commitment to the local community and its particular history. Even the hours specifically set aside for local programming (Prime Time Access Rule, adopted by the FCC in 1970) are usually filled with nationally syndicated game shows or reruns. Public service becomes public relations, attached to the marketing department.

In response to this criticism, many broadcasters point to the efforts they expend in local news. This expenditure, however commendable, is often based on the rule of least effort, highest profit. Local news, though expensive when compared to nothing, is fast-selling ad time for local businesses. Other types of locally originated programming, like local documentary coverage of controversial issues, require additional staff, and are harder to sell to local businesses. In addition, a strong local newscast is a lead-in to prime time, and more ad sales. Whatever limited money a station owner is willing to spend on local programming will inevitably go to news.

> While a stong local newscast can bring in more than 1/3 of a station's revenue, the financial boost reaches far beyond its time period... In market after market, the station with the #1 rated newscast is the leader overall (Vitale 46).

Channel's 1987 Field Guide reports,

> Even as the networks struggle against a weak national advertising market, local ad sales in most parts of the country are booming, reflecting strong advertiser confidence and continued profitability for the affiliates (43).

Notice the quote refers to all local ad sales, not just ad sales for newscasts.

Even in those markets where a reputation for public concern is cultivated by broadcasters, a closer look reveals that the thinking behind these efforts emanates from the sales department, not the program director (Grillo 58). Community concern or service, much less local input, is strictly pragmatic, sometimes even as a way to prevent "spillover" from another affiliate of the same network whose signal is imported on cable, as in the case of Palm Beach, Fla. (Clary 21).

The cable industry's highly publicized commitments to public access and local origination have proven to be minimal and shrinking (Corson 383).

Local citizens used to have some pull when they called their local broadcaster demanding fair handling of a controversial issue, or requesting publicity for a community event or organization. Since the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine, they have no legal standing. There is no obligation on the part of the station, and most often no local programming that may handle a

request like this. All local staffers can do is say they are sorry, but they are not the ones who make the decisions.

Nowhere has the disappointing reality of the new technologies been more obvious than in interactive cable television, which has given us the Home Shopping Network. Freed from the limitations on commercials, HSN bought eleven UHF frequencies. The Home Shopping Network is also available on most cable systems. HSN, in the words of Les Brown,

> has changed an advertising medium into a sales medium. It's commercialism run amok: this isn't electronic retailing, it's a living satire on the tv industry's venality (Brown 24).

The promise of interactive video in politics has raised as many fears as hopes. Besides the fears of loss of privacy, there are different views on its benefits in "town meeting" or "electronic voting" contexts. Rutgers political scientist Benjamin Barker says,

> It offers the technological means to a more united, active, communicative citizenry...a potentially powerful ally of democracy...can encourage participation and civility (quoted in Corson 384).

University of Massachussetts political scientist Jean Bethke Elshtain disagrees,

> "Being a citizen of a democracy requires more than merely registering one's opinion...A true democratic policy

involves a deliberative process, participation with other citizens, a sense of moral responsibility for one's society...The ersatz participation characteristic of interactive television is dramatically at odds with this democratic ideal" (quoted in Corson 384).

While the debate goes on, even modest experiments in interactive video are few. Videotext is still promised, and estimates are that 40% of American households will have access to it by the turn of the century (Corson 383).

The Challenge

Is the solution to the unkept promises and wasted potential of these new technologies drastic reregulation? Ithiel de Sola Pool thought not:

> The easy access, low cost, and distributed intelligence of modern means of communication are prime reason for hope. The democratic impulse to regulate evils, as Tocqueville warned, is ironically a reason for worry. Lack of technical grasp by policy makers and their propensity to solve problems of conflict, privacy, intellectual property, and monopoly by accustomed bureaucratic routines are the main reasons for concern (Pool 86).

While I agree with Pool that instant regulation is not the answer, he seems to worry unduly about the First Amendment rights of the television industry rather than the individual citizen, or communities who have no access to their local media. The

electronic media are highly monopolized, and highly inaccessible at this time. Our current regulatory thinking is inadequate to deal with a completely new technological stage that has changed all our media.

A major debate at this time centers on what exactly is the television industry. If it is like print, it should be free of all regulation. But is it a common carrier, which means the government should insure access to it for all? Or is it like broadcasting, which means it should be licensed, and its content somewhat regulated (Pool 78). I would submit that it is not any of these, and we need to stop worshipping old formulations and start responding to what it actually does. We need to come up with policies based on principles that grow out of the role we want the media to play in our society. Given our pluralism, and our pluralistic system, this won't be easy. But the industry is completely controlled at this time by commercial interests, and in the long run, this is not a healthy situation for a democracy. The situation is comparable to having our schools or our government run by business.

In a period of such tremendous technological flux, allowing the media to "settle out" based on competition has created an industry which seems destined for a showdown with the public interest. I would venture several modest proposals to begin a discussion about the future of this industry in a democratic society.

1. The government should insure access to cable for all, including stipulations for public access facilities.

2. Broadcasters should be required to operate in "the public interest," with stipulations for local community involvement.

3. Regulation of trafficking, and safeguards against monopolization should be reinstituted. Large conglomerates should be broken up, and the licenses returned to local community entities.

4. There should be government support for diversified, high quality programming. The Canadian government has instituted a small tax on VCR's and videotapes to help support the national programming efforts. This is one possibility. The CPB and PBS should be revamped (taken out of the political appointment circus), funded at a reasonable level, and support specified for independent producers from local markets to produce programming.

5. Organizations should be developed and activated by local citizens and governments to give input from the community as to its media policies and interests.

6. Universities and communication scholars should promote a national debate with educators, industry representatives, and citizens groups about the impact of the media, and how to create a model industry for a democratic society.

I realize this is a blue sky exercise, but there are solutions out there, if we will have the courage and creativity to discover them. I am not advocating a Luddite solution. (Postman seems to say we should all pitch our televisions out the window before they destroy us.) The new technologies are tremendously promising, exciting, and challenging. Commercial interests control a cultural institution in our society that exerts a more powerful influence than almost any other, outside our families. We defer to the marketplace at our peril. We have to begin to develop policies based on an understanding of television's potentials, and our responsibility to insure its beneficial development

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